

COLORADO CANYONS NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA
Rabbit Valley Working Group
September 23, 2002

Attendees:

John Foster	Kathy Click	John Potter
Greg Gnesios	Mike Click	Lynae Rogers
Bob Silbernagel	Jim Cooper	Jane Ross
Sue Benjamin	Neal McKinstry	Lovell Sasser
Arleta Carr	Mel Lloyd	Charlie Sweet
	Harley Metz	Paul Toft

Greetings and Introductions

Jane Ross, Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area (CCNCA) Planning and Environmental Coordinator, handed out copies of the September 9, 2002, meeting minutes. Jane introduced Harley Metz, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Ecologist, who will be conducting the Land Health Assessment for the CCNCA.

Also speaking before the group tonight, regarding land health and grazing, is Lynae Rogers, BLM Rangeland Management Specialist. Lynae distributed historical data on the area's precipitation, in addition to a copy of the newsletter entitled, "Colorado Branch for Holistic Management."

Working Group Discussions

At John Potter's inquiry, Greg Gnesios, CCNCA Manager, explained the National Conservation Area's (NCA) staffing structure, and its relationship to the BLM Grand Junction field office.

Lynae presented information on two grazing allotments within the NCA, those being the Jouflas and West Salt allotments. Both are run in winter and early spring, and both have accepted per-head reductions in their allotments, as well as shortened grazing periods. Actual use data has been below the allowable use allotments since 1987, and the last major drought the area saw was in 1977. Lynae presented a series of slides showing the environmental stress caused by the current drought compared to past drought years, especially the 1977 drought. Lynae reminded the group that we have been in the current pattern the past four years, and once rain returns, the land recovers. Recovery depends on a number of things, including location and soil conditions. BLM allotments will not allow any cattle through this winter, and the permittees understand the situation given the drought. Lynae anticipates allowing one-half to three-quarters of the allotment to return next year, if the area receives adequate precipitation. The allotment management plans stipulate the number of heads allowed to run per available vegetation, as well as animal units per month (AUM) criteria. Lynae explained the BLM's plans for the area's rehabilitation, which includes planning for the desert bighorn

sheep's health and well-being. There are available water sources, although some permittees plan to haul water. Deferred rotation, as well as a 7-pasture rotation system, will be utilized to encourage land health.

Jane asked Lynae what decisions the Working Group could make to assist in this initiative, and Lynae responded that a plan allowing for the use of non-native species is important, because of those species' ability to get established faster and hold the soil, discouraging cheatgrass in extreme drought conditions. Harley added that it is difficult, if not impossible, for native plants to gain a foothold in our current drought conditions. Jane explained that the group is not required to address this issue, but land health will be included in the resource management plan (RMP) and their input would be valued.

A question was asked about how much grazing fees go toward paying for land health, and a portion of those fees goes back into the range fund. Lynae is working with the Delta Correctional Facility to grow native shrubs for rehabilitating Rabbit Valley north of I-70, and the range fund is paying for this project. Harley said the bigger question is whether you want to recover the land with entirely native plants, which is costly, or establish some non-native species in the area in order to meet the immediate need of discouraging invasive plants, such as cheatgrass. Once vegetation is established, grazing the land assists in maintaining the soils. Lynae explained that utilizing grazing rotation is critical to land health.

Harley handed out a copy of the "Standards of Public Land Health" for the State of Colorado. The BLM, Colorado State University, and three Resource Advisory Councils combined efforts in developing these standards for the state. The five comprehensive standards are:

1. Upland soils
2. Riparian systems
3. Plant and animal communities
4. Threatened and Endangered species
5. Water quality

Harley indicated that the NCA's Land Health Assessment was performed utilizing these standards, as well as detailed worksheets. A soils-based site inventory was conducted in 1993, evaluating vegetation that can be grown on various soils. As a result, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has developed site guidelines for range specialists to use as working tools.

The site inventory looked at three zones in the Rabbit Valley area—north of the river, south of the river, and the river corridor itself. The allotments within the NCA were part of this site inventory, and Harley covered those allotments specifically located in Rabbit Valley. Harley pointed out the severe impact that fire can have on land health in an environment such as Rabbit Valley.

The BLM has an inventory of all noxious weeds currently found in the NCA, and also of concern is tamarisk and how that plant's invasion is mitigated. A pattern is evident on

range sites that have received a lot of disturbance and use, and these sites will be the toughest to recover given the cheatgrass invasion. The BLM did not, however, see enough damage in Rabbit Valley to classify it as unhealthy. Paul Toft pointed out that recreational use does not necessarily equate to unhealthy land. Harley confirmed that some areas not lending themselves to recovery would not be rehabilitated, but rather considered as potential sites for parking lots, roads, and user facilities.

John encouraged the group to address the land health issues rather than defer decision-making to the BLM, and asked Harley and Lynae to mark the map with areas most suitable for rehabilitating. All agreed and these areas will be discussed at the next meeting. Harley emphasized that drought is the problem and not anything else at this point. The group was asked to consider potential management opportunities in the process. Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) apply in this situation, and a threshold must be set if the recovery area is a priority. Trail density, recreation, and grazing criteria will assist in evaluating the LAC change. Frequency transects, or controlled areas, tell the ecologists of the trends in vegetative recovery.

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 15, at 5:45 p.m., in the Fruita Civic Center.

John adjourned the meeting at 7:45 p.m.